

How Climate Became Germany's New Culture War

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Highlight: For years, migration tore the country apart. Now it's the environment.

Body

BERLIN — When Christian Lindner, the head of Germany's Liberal party, recently said that there was a "culture war on cars" in his country, people laughed it off as an exaggeration. After all, the Liberals are Germany's most pro-business, anti-regulation party, and they take particular aim at environmental policies.

But here's the thing: In a way, Mr. Lindner is right. For the last several years, Germany has been embroiled in a cultural war over immigration, refugees and diversity. But as those fires burn out, a new one is building. The environment is becoming the new migration — a deeply polarizing issue, and one that the populist right is gearing up to exploit.

Migration remains a contested issue in Germany, of course. But the hysteria of 2015 and 2016 has subsided. The number of people seeking asylum in Germany has dropped significantly — last year there were only 186,000, down from a high of 746,000 in 2016.

And while the far-right Alternative for Germany party, known as the AfD, continues to focus on immigration, the mainstream has begun to set it aside. For much of 2018, the Christian Social Union, the conservative, Bavarian branch of the center-right Christian Democrats, waged an internal party war against Chancellor Angela Merkel's relatively open position on migration. But after painful losses in the Bavarian election last year, in which the party ran on a hard-line immigration platform, the C.S.U. decided to let it go.

At the same time, debates on environmental issues are getting more heated, both in public and in private. Be it the reality of global warming, limits on greenhouse gases, the future of mobility in cities or the protection of bees — the debate is growing polemical and emotional, as people are beginning to feel the consequences of environmental policies in their everyday lives.

This year, for example, several large German cities will ban cars with older diesel engines from their urban core, based on European Union limits on nitrogen dioxide in the air. The bans, announced last year, incited public outrage.

In January, a group of physicians led by the lung specialist Dieter Köhler added to the anger by questioning the validity of the European Union limits. For weeks, Dr. Köhler toured the talk shows, and the AfD celebrated him as a hero for daring to speak up against what it sees as ecological paternalism. Even Andreas Scheuer, the minister of transportation, embraced the doctors' statement — despite warnings from the scientific community that Dr. Köhler, not an epidemiologist, lacked the necessary expertise to make it.

In fact, it later emerged that some of Dr. Köhler's key points were erroneous. But by then it didn't matter; the diesel bans had become politically toxic.

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Germans love their cars — not just as personal property and symbols of personal expression, but as national symbols of German ingenuity and manufacturing prowess. So it makes sense that the clash over the environment would center on the automobile. When Regine Günther, the senator for transportation and the environment in Berlin's city government, recently said, "We would like people to dispose of their cars," she was denounced as a "car hater" and a "green Communist" on social media.

When a preliminary report for the federal Transportation Ministry recommended speed limits on the autobahn and higher gas prices to lower carbon emissions, the public response was so hostile that the ministry disavowed it.

Even children are considered fair game: Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish climate activist, is a favorite target of the German right, with the secretary general of the Christian Democrats calling her political stance "pure ideology."

How did the environment become so hot, so fast?

First, there are good reasons to be angry when the German government calls for significant sacrifices by everyday citizens for the health of the planet — even as it let Volkswagen and other carmakers get away with cheating on emissions data.

At the same time, populist parties in Germany and Europe are increasingly campaigning against environmental rules. Such opposition perfectly fits into populist narratives and patterns: skepticism about science, anger over "political correctness" and a libertarian reflex against government regulations in general. The mainstream right is following suit, claiming to try to cut off the far right but in reality taking advantage of a suddenly attractive political target.

Environmental issues produce the same fundamental cleavages as migration. Both migration and environmental policies are aiming at global and moral goals that citizens profit from only in the abstract, while the costs are immediate. Accepting asylum seekers is a global moral responsibility; the "costs" — overcrowded kindergartens and schools, neighborhood tensions — are local. Getting rid of old diesel cars might be a vital step toward fighting climate change, but how are you supposed to get to work?

On immigration or the environment, where you stand is a matter of your worldview. Whether you drive a car or ride a bike has become a symbol for embracing or rejecting a whole set of values connected to the notion of global responsibility. Conservatives and traditionalists feel they are being pressured by the cultural imperialism of urban liberal elites who can afford not to have a car.

And it's on this divide, more than on any particular policy, where the clash is hottest. Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the new head of the Christian Democrats, recently lashed out against Berlin's "latte macchiato drinkers," while Mr. Scheuer, the minister of transportation, said in an interview, "In Berlin's political scene, people are gloating over discussions which often have nothing to do with the everyday realities of people outside the capital."

It's 2015 all over again: Back then, it was the naïve open-border idealists against the xenophobes. This time it's the sentimental urban tree-hugger ideologues against ignorant Joe Diesel.

The immigration debate tore Germany apart, and made it harder to arrive at a coherent, fair migration policy for the country, and for Europe. If anything, the stakes this time — namely, the future of the planet — are higher. How do we avoid making the same mistakes?

The obvious first step is to lower the temperature, and for each side to concede a few painful truths. The leftists need to concede that environmental policies do come with costs, and that they need to find ways to ameliorate their immediate pain for everyday Germans — for example, by compensating people with lower incomes for higher energy costs. On the other hand, conservatives must resist the lure of securing votes by exploiting resentment against the boogeyman of cultural imperialism.

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Protecting Germany's health and the global climate are too important for political games. We know what the resulting polarization looks like. Do we really want to go down that road again?

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PHOTO: Marchers protesting a ban on driving older diesel cars in Stuttgart, Germany, a center of the German car industry. Their banner says, "We are diesel" and "a stupid policy." (PHOTOGRAPH BY Marijan Murat/DPA, via Associated Press FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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